

National Endowment for the Arts

TEACHER'S GUIDE



JACK LONDON'S

**The Call
of the Wild**

NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS



**THE BIG
READ**

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The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.



The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The Institute's mission is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas. The Institute works at the national level and in coordination with state and local organizations to sustain heritage, culture, and knowledge; enhance learning and innovation; and support professional development.



Arts Midwest connects people throughout the Midwest and the world to meaningful arts opportunities, sharing creativity, knowledge, and understanding across boundaries. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 25 years.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Suggested Teaching Schedule	2
Lesson One: Biography	4
Lesson Two: Culture and History	5
Lesson Three: Narrative and Point of View.....	6
Lesson Four: Characters	7
Lesson Five: Symbols and Metaphors.....	8
Lesson Six: Jack London's Writing Style	9
Lesson Seven: Character Development	10
Lesson Eight: The Plot Unfolds.....	11
Lesson Nine: Themes of the Book.....	12
Lesson Ten: What Makes a Great Book?.....	13
Essay Topics	14
Capstone Projects	15
Handout One: The Klondike Gold Rush.....	16
Handout Two: Pack Mentality.....	17
Handout Three: Jack London and Naturalism	18
Teaching Resources.....	19
NCTE Standards.....	20



“There is an ecstasy that marks the summit of life, and beyond which life cannot rise. And such is the paradox of living, this ecstasy comes when one is most alive, and it comes as complete forgetfulness that one is alive. This ecstasy... came to Buck, leading the pack, sounding the old wolf-cry, straining after the food that was alive and that fled swiftly before him through the moonlight.”

—from *The Call of the Wild*





Introduction

Welcome to the Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts. Designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture, the Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become life-long readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through Jack London's classic novel, *The Call of the Wild*. Each lesson has four sections: a focus topic, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the novel, the historical period, and the author. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the book, the Big Read CD presents first-hand accounts of why *The Call of the Wild* remains so compelling more than a century after its initial publication. Some of America's most celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make these Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, the Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, booklists, timelines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of a great American author.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

Suggested Teaching Schedule

1

Day One

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Listen to the Big Read CD. Discuss Reader's Guide essays. Have students write about their work experience and reading habits.

Homework: Read Chapter 1: "Into the Primitive" and Handout One.

2

Day Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Discuss the Klondike and the gold seekers' arduous journey across the Yukon Territory. Map Buck's journey.

Homework: Read Chapter 2: "The Law of Club and Fang."

3

Day Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Discuss the book's narrative point of view. Analyze passages that reveal Buck's perspective. Write a story from the perspective of an animal.

Homework: Read Chapter 3: "The Dominant Primordial Beast" and Handout Two.

4

Day Four

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Discuss Handout Three. Analyze each dog's personality and place in the pack. Write an essay considering the importance of the fight between Buck and Spitz.

Homework: Read Chapter 4: "Who Has Won to Mastership."

5

Day Five

FOCUS: Symbols and Metaphors

Activities: Discuss the symbolic meaning of the "mysterious song" Buck hears as he adjusts to life in Alaska. Write an essay about the man Buck "sees" squatting by the campfire.

Homework: Read Chapter 5: "The Toil of Trace and Trail" and Handout Three. Ask students to select a favorite passage from the book, and note three characteristics of London's writing style.

6

Day Six

FOCUS: Jack London's Writing Style

Activities: Discuss Naturalism. Analyze favorite passages to better understand London's style. Write an essay considering the parallel London makes between the artist, soldier, and Buck.

Homework: Read Chapter 6: "For the Love of a Man."

7

Day Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Discuss the parallels between the human characters and the dogs. Discuss London's view of humans and animals.

Homework: Read Chapter 7: "The Sound of the Call."

8

Day Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Discuss the book's turning points and what we learn about Buck during those moments. Write an essay on the novel's conclusion.

Homework: Consider whether Buck's actions would have differed if John Thornton had survived.

9

Day Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Book

Activities: Discuss themes of Nature and Civilization. Write an essay about the novel's epigraph.

Homework: Begin working on essays.

10

Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Book?

Activities: Explore the qualities of a great work of fiction.

Homework: Work on essays.

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a work of fiction. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to more fully understand the book.

Jack London's formal education stopped after grammar school. As a teenager, he held a variety of jobs to help support his family, but never gave up his goal of pursuing an education. At age 19, London enrolled as a freshman at Oakland High School while working there as a janitor. He quit school after one year, but was eventually admitted to the University of California, Berkeley. Frustrated by the slow pace of his classes, he dropped out after one semester and began a life-long practice of self-education, often reading and studying more than fifteen hours a day.

His brother-in-law, Captain James Shepard, asked London to join him in the 1897 Klondike gold rush. They began the ill-fated adventure that summer. Shepard died in the Klondike, and London became stricken with scurvy that winter. London returned to San Francisco in July 1898, but this one year provided inspiration and material for many stories.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask students to read the following essays from the Reader's Guide: "Jack London" and "London and His Other Works." Have them present the three most important points they learned from the CD and Reader's Guide.

Jack London often encouraged unpublished writers to work hard, write consistently, and "have a philosophy." In a letter to one such writer, London wrote, "There's only one way to make a beginning, and that is to begin; and begin with hard work, patience, prepared for all the disappointments [...] which were mine before I succeeded." Ask your students how this advice might apply to them as they plan their own educations and careers.

Writing Exercise

Jack London belonged to the working-class poor until he achieved literary fame. Even without a high school education, he was voracious reader, spending several hours reading before he fell asleep every night. Ask your students to write a one-page essay about their work experience and reading habits. Can they relate to any part of Jack London's struggle to obtain an education? How does education fit into the pursuit of their goals and dreams?

Homework

Read *The Call of the Wild*, Chapter 1: "Into the Primitive" and Handout One from this guide. Why does Manuel steal and sell Buck? What does the "man with the red sweater" teach Buck?

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of a work of fiction. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place can assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore *The Call of the Wild*.

Preparing for the journey to the Klondike was no easy task. The Canadian government enforced a law that required every team of prospectors to carry one thousand pounds of supplies with them to make it over the mountains. Most of this weight came from food (including the recommended 20 pounds of flour, 12 pounds of bacon, 12 pounds of beans, 3 pounds of coffee, and 5 pounds of corn meal). Heavy equipment and the warmest clothing available made up the rest. Once a team reached Dawson, they found much of the land already staked. Many obtained jobs working for other miners, in hotels, bars, or supply shops. Mail, carried entirely by dogsled, was often delayed for months at a time in the winter. Cities like Dawson were also rife with conmen. From its impassable trails to its sawdust bar rooms, the Klondike was a dangerous place.

Discussion Activities

The Yukon Territory is so large it could cover two-thirds of the western United States. Gary Paulson gives a clear comparison of what the gold rushers went through: “put a hundred-pound pack on your back and then walk from New York to Chicago through dense forest and over huge mountains, subsisting only on what food you could hunt along the way, while working twenty-four hour days, panning and picking for gold in every stream or rock gorge.”

When news of the Gold Rush came in 1897, thousands of people (ninety percent were men) left their homes and families to search for gold, with no certainty they would be successful. Ask your students to describe the Klondike based on what they learned from listening to the CD and reading Handout One. Would your students be motivated to undergo such a treacherous journey? What was life like in your city or town during the 1890s?

Writing Exercise

In Chapter 1, Buck is stolen from his home and sold north as a sled dog to Perrault and François. Make a map of Buck’s journey, noting what he learns in each new place. In preparation for Lesson Three, students should also pay attention to the way London describes each place from a dog’s point of view.

Homework

Read *The Call of the Wild*, Chapter 2: “The Law of Club and Fang.” What does Buck learn after he is “suddenly jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of things primordial”? From this chapter, describe several specific things Buck learns by either experience or instinct.

3

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator can be a major or minor character. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the book using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. The distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Call of the Wild is told from third-person point of view by a limited omniscient narrator. This narrator tells the story entirely from the perspective of the main character, Buck, a St. Bernard/Scotch Shepherd dog. In order to understand *The Call of the Wild*, students must understand Buck’s personality and motivations. This lesson is designed to prepare your students to understand Buck’s actions in the novel’s last chapter.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups, and give each one of the following passages to analyze. Ask students to answer the following questions: What does the passage reveal about Buck’s view of himself? What does the passage tell us about his view of his world, especially the humans around him?

- Chapter 1: “But Buck was neither house dog nor kennel dog. The whole realm was his [...] for he was king—king over all creeping, crawling, flying things of Judge Miller’s place, humans included.”
- Chapter 1: Buck “was beaten (he knew that); but he was not broken. He saw, once and for all, that he stood no chance against a man with a club. He had learned the lesson, and in all his afterlife he never forgot it.”
- Chapter 2: “This first theft marked Buck fit to survive in the hostile Northland environment. It marked his adaptability, his capacity to adjust himself to changing conditions [...] It marked, further, the decay or going to pieces of his moral nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence.”



Writing Exercise

Try to imitate London’s storytelling devices by narrating a story from your own life from the point of view of a pet (or an imaginary animal). Is this technique easy or difficult? What other novels, poems, or stories are told from an animal’s point of view?



Homework

Read *The Call of the Wild*, Chapter 3: “The Dominant Primordial Beast” and Handout Two from this guide. Why do Buck and Spitz fight? Does it have to end the way it does? Why or why not?

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The main character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist often overcomes a weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great courage may be called a “hero.” A protagonist of dubious tenacity and questionable virtue is an “antihero.” Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists in the attempt to understand whether they are heroic. The protagonist's journey is made more dramatic by challenges presented by characters with different beliefs. A “foil” provokes the protagonist so as to highlight more clearly certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Buck is the protagonist of the novel. Several antagonists oppose him—dogs, humans, even the harsh climate and landscape. For this lesson, focus on the canine characters; Lesson Seven will focus on the humans.



Discussion Activities

Discuss Handout Two, “Pack Mentality.” Assign each group one dog other than Buck from Chapters 1-3: Curly, Dave, Spitz, Sol-leks, Billee, or Joe. Ask students to find passages that reveal information about the dog's personality. Where does the dog fit into the pack? What does Buck think of this dog? What does the dog think of Buck and of the humans? Have each group present the key attributes of their dog's character, giving specific examples from the text to support their answers.



Writing Exercise

Chapter 3 centers on the fight between Buck and Spitz—one of the novel's most important scenes. How does the narrator prepare the reader for this scene? Who initiates this fight? Why does Buck win? Did the fight have to end in Spitz's death? Why or why not?



Homework

Read *The Call of the Wild*, Chapter 4: “Who Has Won to Mastership.” Is it possible to interpret the dogs as symbolic? What passages might suggest they are more than just characters?

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Symbols and Metaphors

Symbols are interpretive keys to the text. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to reference (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal or figurative meaning attached to the object—above and beyond face value. Symbols are often found in the book's title, within a profound action, or captured by the name or personality of a character. A metaphor is a statement that one thing *is* something else, which, in a literal sense, it is not. By revealing similarities, metaphors provide insight into characters, events, and issues.

While Jack London does not use figurative language frequently, some of his characters and themes may be interpreted as symbolic or metaphorical. For instance, the land in *The Call of the Wild* holds significance that extends beyond weather and terrain.



Discussion Activities

Buck begins to hear a mysterious song only after he is removed from his life as a domesticated pet and taken to the harsh environment of Alaska. Ask students to reread a significant passage from Chapter 3: “With the aurora borealis flaming coldly overhead [...] this song of the huskies might have been the defiance of life, only it was pitched in a minor key, with long-drawn wailings and half-sobs, and was more the pleading of life, the articulate travail of existence.” There are several other passages that describe the allure of this song to Buck.

First, discuss what this song is literally. Then, ask your students to consider the ways the song functions as a metaphor. Is this song only heard by Buck? How does the full passage suggest a major theme of the novel for both humans and dogs?



Writing Exercise

After the great fight with Spitz, Buck begins to “see” a hairy man, squatting by his campfire (see Chapter 4). Who is he? What might he symbolize to Buck?



Homework

Read *The Call of the Wild*, Chapter 5: “The Toil of Trace and Trail.” Read Handout Three “Jack London and Naturalism.” Ask students to find a favorite passage from the novel, and note three characteristics of London’s writing style.

6

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Jack London's Writing Style

A little background information may help students appreciate the complexity of the novel despite London's straightforward style. In a 1900 letter, Jack London wrote, "Never a night (whether I have gone out or not), but the last several hours are spent in bed with my books. All things interest me—the world is so very good." He maintained a disciplined, rigorous writing schedule throughout his life, even while travelling and exploring the world. He spent the mornings writing with the goal of 1,000 words each day. After he married his second wife, Charmian Kittredge in 1905, they maintained a new daily schedule until his death. While he wrote 1,000 new words, she would type and prepare the manuscript for the previous day's work.



Discussion Activities

Using Handout Three, ask your students to identify some of the characteristics of Naturalism. Have them share some of their favorite passages from the book. Do they feel the passages reflect a realistic view of nature and the environment? Other than the subject matter, is there a quality that makes London's writing seem "natural"?

London's artistic intentions were often misunderstood. In his essay, "The Other Animals," London explained: "The writing of [*The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*]...was in truth a protest against the 'humanizing' of animals...Time and again...I wrote, speaking of my dog-heroes: 'He did not think these things; he merely did them'...and I did it in order to hammer into the average human understanding that these dog-heroes of mine were not directed by abstract reasoning, but by instinct, sensation, and emotion, and by simple reasoning." What does London mean by this? Discuss this quote and its relevance to the book, using specific examples from the text.



Writing Exercise

One of *The Call of the Wild*'s most famous and important passages occurs in Chapter 3: "There is an ecstasy that marks the summit of life, and beyond which life cannot rise. And such is the paradox of living, this ecstasy comes when one is most alive, and it comes as a complete forgetfulness that one is alive." Read the full passage closely as a class. Notice that the full passage unites the artist, the soldier, and Buck. This comparison may come as a surprise, but consider what parallel London is drawing among these three types. What insight does this passage offer into London's writing style and artistic vision?



Homework

Read *The Call of the Wild*, Chapter 6: "For the Love of a Man." How does John Thornton differ from Buck's previous masters? Why does Buck respond to Thornton with such devotion?

7

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Works of fiction trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist undergoes profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief in each character. Still, the tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next, affecting the drama and the plot.

Lesson Four focused on the dogs in *The Call of the Wild*; this lesson will focus on the humans. In "The Other Animals" London admonishes, "Let us be very humble. We who are so very human are very animal." As you move through this lesson, consider what London might have meant by this statement.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



What do you think Jack London meant by the statement cited above? As your class discusses the human characters, ask each student to write about the parallels between one human character's behavior and one dog's. (You might ask students to review their notes from Lesson Four.)

- Judge Miller: Although we never meet Judge Miller, what do we learn about him from Buck? Does Buck respect or love him?
- The "man in the red sweater": Upon first reading, this man may seem unreasonably brutal and cruel. But from another perspective, could this man's lesson to Buck—"the law of club and fang"—be exactly what Buck needs to survive in the Klondike?
- Perrault and François: What special qualities does Perrault see in Buck? Why do they allow Buck to fight Spitz to the death, even though this means their sled will lose a member of their sled team?
- Hal, Charles, and Mercedes: Can these three inept humans be viewed as *The Call of the Wild*'s primary antagonists? What might London be suggesting by including three humans who seek gold at the expense of their own well-being?
- John Thornton: Why does Buck develop genuine love for Thornton? Why does Thornton admire Buck so much?



Homework

Read *The Call of the Wild*, Chapter 7: "The Sound of the Call." Despite Buck's adoration for Thornton, why does the "strain of the primitive" remain "alive and active" in Buck?

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author artfully builds a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and inform character development. The timing of events from beginning to middle to end can make a book predictable or riveting. A plot, propelled by a crisis, will reach a climax, and close with a resolution (sometimes called *dénouement*). Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy time while telling the story. A successful author will keep a reader entranced by clever pacing built within the tale, sometimes confounding a simple plot by telling stories within stories.

The Call of the Wild is told chronologically without any flashbacks. The reader witnesses Buck's transformation from the contented, civilized pet of Judge Miller to the "dominant primordial beast" who kills his rival, endures hunger and fatigue, and eventually answers the call of his wild ancestors.



Discussion Activities

Map the book's major turning points, plots, and subplots. In small groups, students will map a timeline of *The Call of the Wild*'s major events. Students should identify the arc of the story including rising action, climax, and resolution. Make sure they include the following significant events:

- Chapter 3: Buck defeats his rival, Spitz. How does this fight trigger Buck's more "primitive" nature?
- Chapter 6: Buck wins \$1,600 dollars for Thornton in a bet at Dawson City. How does Buck accomplish this feat? Why does this lead to Buck's fame throughout Alaska?
- Chapter 7: John Thornton discovers gold "like yellow butter." How does Buck respond to this new lifestyle, compared to the other dogs?
- Chapter 7: Buck leaves John Thornton, unknowingly missing a raid that wipes out the entire camp. How does Buck respond to Thornton's death?



Writing Exercise

Flashbacks are absent from the book, but many events foreshadow its conclusion. Was the ending a surprise to you? Why or why not? Ask students to find specific textual references where the narrator suggests that Buck will ultimately reject civilization and follow his nature.



Homework

Pretend that John Thornton survived the brutal massacre. Do you think Buck would stay with Thornton, or would Buck still follow the wolves into the forest? What might London be suggesting by killing Buck's beloved master?

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Book

Profound questions raised by the story allow the character (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A work of fiction can shed light on these age-old debates by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.



Discussion Activities

There are many themes in *The Call of the Wild*, but none as central as the tension between Nature and Civilization. Ask your students to discuss the various ways this complex theme is revealed.

Buck ultimately struggles between his love for his master, John Thornton, and the enigmatic call of his ancestors. Ask students to find specific moments when this call captivates Buck. Use this passage from Chapter 6 to begin your discussion: “Deep in the forest a call was sounding, and as often as he heard this call, mysteriously thrilling and luring, he felt compelled to turn his back upon the fire and the beaten earth around it, and to plunge into the forest [...] but [...] the love for John Thornton drew him back to the fire again.” How does this passage describe an archetypal human conflict?



Writing Exercise

The Call of the Wild opens with a four-line epigraph from “Atavism,” a poem by John Myers O’Hara, published in 1902. Jack London wrote to O’Hara in 1907: “I ran across those lines from your poem ‘Atavism,’ in a detached fragment. Never knew who wrote them, and never knew the rest of the poem. Won’t you PLEASE send me the whole poem? Of all the poetry I know, there were no four lines within a hundred million miles as appropriate for the key to *The Call of the Wild* as were those four lines of yours that I used.” Do you agree or disagree that these lines articulate a major theme of the novel?



Homework

Begin working on essays, choosing one of the Essay Topics in this guide. Outlines are due at the next class.

Lesson Ten

FOCUS:

What Makes a Great Book?

Works of fiction illustrate the connections between individuals and questions of humanity. Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives, while painting those conflicts in the larger picture of human struggle. Readers forge bonds with the story as the writer's voice, style, and sense of poetry inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities for learning, imagining, and reflecting, a great book is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changing lives, challenging assumptions, and breaking new ground.



Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. In small groups, ask students to discuss specific books that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Call of the Wild*?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Jack London create through *The Call of the Wild*? Although the protagonist of the novel is a dog, what does this story suggest about the concerns and motivations of people during the 1890s Gold Rush? Are these concerns and motivations still relevant in 21st century America? Why or why not?



Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a persuasive letter to a friend, perhaps one who does not like to read, explaining why *The Call of the Wild* is a good book. Develop an argument that explains why the novel has meaning for many people, not just a particular group.

Have students work on essays in class. Be available to assist students in developing their thesis. Have students partner to edit outlines and/or rough drafts. Provide students with the characteristics of a well-written essay.



Homework

Continue working on essays. Students will turn in a rough draft of their essays at the next class.

Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the Discussion Questions in the Reader's Guide. Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, as long as they are specific and compelling. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

For essays, students should organize their ideas around a thesis about the book. This statement or thesis should be focused, with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should be backed by references to the text.

1. Why might Jack London choose to focus on a dog's point of view during the Gold Rush rather than a human's? Choose one human from the novel. How might the story be different if it were told from his or her point of view?
2. In Chapter 5, Buck endures a severe beating from Hal. On one level, John Thornton saves Buck in this scene. But what quality allows Buck to become the only member of his pack to survive?
3. Buck's first theft marks him "as fit to survive in the hostile Northland environment." Explain the significance of the description: "but the club of the man with the red sweater had beaten into him a more fundamental and primitive code." What happens to Buck's "moral consideration" after this transformative first theft?
4. Discuss the significance of the novel's title and the titles of each of the book's seven chapters. How do these titles suggest the changing character of Buck?
5. Jack London scholar and the Curator of Literary Manuscripts at the Huntington Library in California, Sara S. Hodson asserts, "Jack London and Buck both share a quality of being able to adapt to whatever situation life hands to them. Buck has to become, in some way, brutal himself in order to survive. It's survival of the fittest and he knows that. *The Call of the Wild* is a timeless classic of literature because it's a book about survival, and survival is an issue for everyone no matter whether we're surviving a bad relationship or whether we live in the Klondike." Using your knowledge of Jack London's biography, do you agree with her assessment? Identify some specific parallels between the author and his protagonist. Is a certain amount of "brutality" necessary for survival, even today?

Capstone Projects

Teachers may consider the ways in which these activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, a student assembly, or a bookstore.

1. Gold has a fascinating history. Research its ancient uses and values compared to its contemporary uses and value. As a class, create a map of the world, indicating the places that gold has been found. Ask each student to choose one country and analyze the way the discovery of gold can transform a country's economic situation—for better and for worse.
2. Expanding on Lesson Two, ask students to consider what it would take to join the Gold Rush of 1897. What kinds of things would they need to carry? How much money would they need for the journey? Students should learn more about Dawson City, the Chilkoot Pass, and the diseases that many gold rushers were likely to contract. Students with an interest in food might consider focusing their research on the food that would have been eaten, or the recipes that would have been popular in a Dawson City hotel.
3. Use photography or artwork to create a photo gallery of life during the Gold Rush. The photos may come from books, from the Internet, or from family photo albums.
4. Graphic designers and illustrators have imagined many different covers for Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*. Create your own book cover using a scene you feel embodies a major theme.
5. Research the history of working dogs. What sorts of jobs are particularly suited to different breeds? How many different types of dogs are mentioned in *The Call of the Wild*? Create a display that highlights these breeds and lists their dominant attributes.
6. Buck is a dog who “becomes” a wolf; in *White Fang*, London features a wolf that “becomes” a dog. Research the relationship between dogs and wolves. Do wolves deserve such a negative reputation from humans? Why do you think so many fairytales, folk legends, and myths feature wolves as antagonists?
7. Compare the Klondike of 1897 to today. Have the geographic boundaries changed? Highlight the similarities and differences, including details about the climate, animals, plant life, and rivers.

The Klondike Gold Rush

In May of 1896 prospector Robert Henderson came upon George Carmack, his wife Kate, and two American Indians, Skookum Jim and Tagish Charley, as they fished on the Thron-diuck River. Henderson called Carmack aside and told him of a small prospect he had found in a nearby creek.

Encouraged by Henderson's tip, Carmack and his friends sought their own stake on Rabbit Creek, not far from Henderson's site. It was there on August 16th, that the first nugget of gold was found by Skookum Jim. The next day Carmack filed the claim—a claim by an American Indian would not have been recognized—and word began to spread up and down the Klondike. Within weeks the surrounding land was claimed, and Rabbit Creek became known as Bonanza Creek.

By mid-July 1897, the first ships loaded with gold docked in San Francisco and Seattle. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* chartered a tugboat for its reporters to meet the *Portland* steamer before it reached shore. The headline read “GOLD! GOLD! GOLD! GOLD! GOLD! GOLD!” Almost immediately, ships bound for Alaska were nearly bursting with those seeking a quick fortune, including the young Jack London.

Most people could not afford the relatively easy steamship ride to Dawson City and were forced to choose between two deadly overland routes—White Pass and Chilkoot Pass, the “Golden Staircase.” White Pass was narrow and steep, covered with ice, and overcrowded with novice fortune hunters. Upwards of 3,000 pack

animals died along this course from exhaustion, starvation, and injury. Chilkoot Pass wasn't much better. In the summer stampeder's faced rain and fog in their climb over enormous boulders exposed by the thaw. Pack animals and extra supplies were abandoned as the trail rose 1,000 feet in the last half-mile. Winter conditions were even worse. Blizzards and avalanches were regular occurrences.

Of the 100,000 people who came to the Klondike, only 40,000 arrived in Dawson, most turning back during the arduous mountain journey. Those who did make it were disappointed to find the land already staked, but striking gold wasn't the only way to get rich in the Klondike. Many enterprising newcomers found wealth by establishing businesses in town. Saloons and supply shops were the most lucrative, preying on the exuberant spending of those who struck gold and the naivety of would-be miners.

By 1899, the Klondike Gold Rush was over. With the good land claimed, many stampeder's went home empty-handed. Others set out for Nome, Alaska, where gold had just been discovered. The Spanish-American War took the attention of the country and the Klondike Gold Rush faded into memory—until revived imaginatively a few years later by Jack London's *White Fang*, *The Son of the Wolf*, and *The Call of the Wild*.

Pack Mentality

A dog is defined by his or her status in the pack. Status determines when he eats, works, plays, and sleeps. When the pack is stable, the dogs act almost as one, each fulfilling its role for the survival of the whole. This stability can only be achieved when a strong, confident dog is in the lead—the Alpha dog.

The Alpha must be calm but powerful to maintain the respect of the others. It is his responsibility to lead, organize, and protect the pack, initiate the hunt, and defend the den. The Alpha makes it clear which behaviors he approves of and which he will not tolerate. When Buck is in the lead “where judgment was required, and quick thinking and quick acting,” he sets the ground rules with the other sled dogs, correcting the bad habits that slow them down. For example, “Pike, who pulled at Buck’s heels, and who never put an ounce more of his weight against the breast-band than he was compelled to do, was swiftly and repeatedly shaken for loafing; and ere the first day was done he was pulling more than ever before in his life.”

An Alpha expects the other dogs to follow, but does not force them. Aggression is a sign of weakness in an Alpha dog and a destabilizing force within the pack. The Alpha’s position is maintained through the constant deference shown to him by the other dogs, rather than by force. In the case of Spitz, who “never lost an opportunity of showing his teeth,” Buck is able to become the Alpha dog when Spitz’s aggression threatens the whole pack.

Most dogs are comfortable being followers. It is less stressful to live within the boundaries set by the leader than to set the rules. Some behaviors that evidence the hierarchy in a pack include allowing a higher-ranking dog to proceed first through a narrow passage, to eat first, to sleep where he pleases, and not greeting that dog with teeth or

paws. The Alpha, of course, receives the most deference, always eating first and not being disturbed when asleep. If any of the pack members infringe on the Alpha’s privileges, it takes only a harsh look to restore order.

If the Alpha dog is not living up to his duties, he will be challenged and replaced. The pack dogs are receptive to the Alpha’s rules, but will not accept a weak leader. In fact, weakness is not accepted in any member of the pack. If a dog is weak, he may be killed. The survival of the pack is more important than any one dog. This is illustrated by the pack’s killing of the weak but friendly Curly after she approaches a superior husky. “They closed in upon her, snarling and yelping, and she was buried, screaming with agony, beneath the bristling mass of bodies.” Perhaps the best follower in *The Call of the Wild* is Dave—relaxed in his downtime and fiercely hardworking in the traces, he serves the pack until his body gives out.

Domesticated dogs bring the pack mentality into their relationships with humans. Biologists believe that between ten and twelve thousand years ago, dogs began to live with humans. In exchange for food, dogs worked herding livestock, pulling heavy loads, and hunting game. The domesticated dog in a healthy household views its owner as the Alpha of the pack. From John Thornton’s first appearance, he establishes himself as the Alpha. Thornton’s “kindliness and largeness” win Buck’s loyalty and respect. “Buck’s love was expressed in adoration. While he went wild with happiness when Thornton touched him or spoke to him, he did not seek these tokens... Buck was content to adore at a distance.” Buck finds in Thornton, as the other dogs had found in Buck, a leader fair in his discipline and at ease in his power.

Jack London and Naturalism

Naturalism is the style of fiction in which characters are forged by their environment. First introduced by the French writer Émile Zola in the 1880's, Naturalism, an extension of Realism, was a reaction to the tenets of Romanticism, which idealized emotion and adventure. While Realism attempts to depict characters and their situations as truthfully as possible, Naturalism moves beyond realistic description to also address the psychological and evolutionary forces that contribute to a character's decision making. Characters must confront their limitations and adapt in a world that can be violent, powerful, and destructive.

At the close of the 19th Century, the typical setting for a novel might be a posh drawing room, pastoral farm, or gruesome battlefield. The ruthless wilderness of the Klondike was as unexplored in fiction as it was in reality. When Jack London began publishing stories from the Great White North like *The Son of the Wolf* (1900), *The Daughter of the Snows* (1902), *The Call of the Wild* (1903), and *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), his strong, vivid prose brought the harsh living and hard decisions of the frontier into the imaginations of American readers.

Hardships in nature force London's characters to be flexible and resourceful in order to survive—and sometimes, fail. Often rejecting civilization in order to follow an inner intuition, characters like Buck function within Charles Darwin's construct of survival of the fittest—a model made clear by the

jockeying for dominance displayed by Buck, Dave, Sol-leks, and Spitz. London's talent for Naturalism is evident in his unsentimental view of his canine protagonist. Sara S. Hodson, Curator of Literary Manuscripts at the Huntington Library, notes that in choosing to tell the story through a dog's point of view, London could have "skated very closely to anthropomorphism, but he never crosses the line. This is one of his crowning achievements: to put you inside the mind of a dog and make it so realistic and have it ring so clear and so truthfully without ever crossing into caricature."

The landscape of the Klondike shaped the destiny of all those who entered it, some leaving as Klondike Kings, others heartbroken and penniless, or still more perishing along the pass. London left the Klondike in 1898 and by the time of his death in 1916, he was one of America's highest paid writers. His Naturalist writings were not restricted to tales of the Gold Rush. His semi-autobiographical works such as *The Road* and *The People of the Abyss* exposed issues of poverty and abuses of power. His work influenced a generation of American Naturalists including Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis, who continued to apply Naturalist theory to social issues in hopes of reform. Like London, they aspired to tell authentic stories about the realities of American society, from the bustling city to the farthest reaches of the Western terrain.

Teaching Resources

Books

Berton, Pierre. *The Klondike Fever: The Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1985.

Labor, Earle, ed. *The Portable Jack London*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

Starr, Kevin. *Americans and the California Dream*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Stasz, Clarice. *American Dreamers*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

Walker, Dale and Jeanne Reesman, eds. *No Mentor but Myself: Jack London on Writing and Writers*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Web sites

The Huntington Library's archive of London's papers, numbering about 60,000 items, is the largest London collection in the world.

<http://www.huntington.org/LibraryDiv/JackLondon.html>

National Postal Museum's Stories from the Gold Rush

<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/gold/gold2.html>

Public Broadcasting's The American Experience: Gold Fever

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/gold/>

University of Washington's Klondike Gold Rush: The Perilous Journey North

<http://www.lib.washington.edu/specialcoll/exhibits/klondike/>

The web site of the Alaska Gallery at the Anchorage Museum includes information Alaska's native people, exploration and settlement, the Gold Rush era, World War II, and Alaska's statehood.

<http://www.anchoragemuseum.org/ag.asp>

NCTE Standards

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards*

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

* This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.



“No man ever became great who did not achieve the impossible. It is the secret of greatness...But not only must he do the impossible, he must continue to do it...Brows are not laurelled for the asking, nor is the earth a heritage to any save to the sons of toil.”

—JACK LONDON

from “The Question of a Name” (1900)

Deep in the forest a call was
ounding, and as often as he
heard this call, mysteriously
thrilling and luring, he felt
compelled to turn his back
upon the fire...and to
plunge into the forest.”

JACK LONDON

from *The Call of the Wild*

*The Big Read is an initiative of the National
Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading
to the center of American culture. The NEA presents
The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of
Museum and Library Services and in cooperation
with Arts Midwest.*

A great nation deserves great art.